

A proximity requirement



Another obstacle for Nevadans is that proximity to a transplant center is part of the criteria for patient selection since organs begin to deteriorate once they are removed. Most Northern Nevadans receive transplants in California, and a few travel to Oregon or Arizona, Smith said.

Most organs recovered from Nevadans are sent to California.

Smith said the sickest patients get priority. The organ sharing network maintains the national waiting list. A series of laboratory tests are done on patients and a formula is used to determine the severity of a person's organ failure.

The most critical patients are given transplants if a matching organ is found and the person is physically able to have the transplant and is able to immediately travel to the center.

Debbie Pinjuv, co-founder of the Nevada Transplant Network with Smith, received a liver transplant six years ago at Stanford University. About four months before her transplant, the hospital said they had an organ for her and she traveled to Stanford University for the operation. But transplant officials then decided a Californian in poorer health would get the liver instead.

"There are no transplant centers in Nevada because there aren't enough people here to support one," Pinjuv said.

"We get discriminated against."

To try to even the playing field, a 1999 Nevada law allowed "directive donation" that let a friend or relative donate an organ directly to a Nevadan if the organs matched. But due to federal medical privacy laws, there is no way to know how many Nevadans benefited from this effort.

To further expand the pool of possible statewide donors, Nevada motorists in 2003 who register with the DMV can use that registration as first-person consent to donate upon their death, which eliminates the need for relatives' permission to donate. According to UNOS, as of June 2005 eight states do not proceed with donation unless consent is received from relatives: Alabama, Georgia, Massachusetts, Mississippi; New Hampshire, New York, Texas and Vermont. But legislation for first-person consent is underway in most of these states.

"People don't know how critical this issue is," Pinjuv said. "It's so important that people donate their organs, especially with the shortages in organs. No one is immune to death. It happens."